

# THE GEORGIA COLONEL.

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RESPONSE OF

MR. JOSEPH B. CUMMING

TO THE TOAST

“GEORGIA,”

AT THE

Banquet of the Sons of the Revolution,

AT SAVANNAH, FEBRUARY 7, 1898.

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# "THE GEORGIA COLONEL."

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(Reprint from the Atlanta Journal of March 1898.)

Major Joseph B. Cumming, of Augusta, one of the State's leading lawyers and most polished orators, at the recent banquet of the Sons of the Revolution in Savannah, responded to the toast "Georgia."

His treatment of the subject was decidedly unique and clever. He spoke as follows:

Dr. Holmes, in *The Autocrat*, speaks of a certain pert young man, who sat at that immortal breakfast table, named John. The humorist takes occasion, in discussing this youngster, to advance the proposition that every individual is in reality a trinity—in the particular instance under review by the writer the trinity includes three Johns, viz.: the John known to his Maker, the ideal John that lives in John's conception of himself, and John as he appears to his fellowmen. The two ideal Johns are apt to be different from each other and are sure to be different from the real John, known to his Maker.

It seems to me that Georgia is a similar trinity. When I speak of Georgia I do not mean a certain territory with its geographical, meteorological and physical characteristics generally, but a people, a social and political aggregation. Of this trinity, of course, the Georgia which really exists is known to its Maker, and as that Georgia is not my theme, I shall only say of it, that in view of the awful certainty and completeness of that knowledge, we should be humbly grateful that our Maker is long suffering and plenteous in mercy. Neither is my theme that member of the trinity, which is the Georgia that appears to our fellowmen. The little I shall have to say will relate to the Georgia—the socio-political entity passing under that name—which we picture to our own thoughts.

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You all recall the highly disappointing, not to say dishonest, conduct of Balaam. You remember that he was hired by Balak to curse the children of Israel and furnished with quite a remarkable donkey to ride to certain high places for that purpose; but Balak had this just complaint to make of him: "I took thee to curse them, and behold thou hast blessed them altogether."

Now, I am afraid my performance on this occasion will be in a mild degree somewhat after the manner of Balaam's—with a difference. Whereas, presumably I was brought to this high place to praise, behold I shall censure, not "altogether," but somewhat. I shall not actually malign Georgia, but really I cannot gush over her. I cannot for the life of me, be altogether insensible to some of her weaknesses, or refrain from discussing them when it is in order to speak of her at all. She has plenty and to spare of eulogists. A critic now and then will be in place, especially if, like myself, he is imbued with a filial spirit; for I am a Georgian as my ancestors have been for three generations.

For some inscrutable reason, it is the habit of many Georgians to speak of Georgia as if she possessed some peculiar and signal superiority and precedence over other communities composed from like elements. One of the earliest and mildest manifestations of this spirit is the addition of another syllable to the State's name. This is effected by dividing the first syllable into two, by which process we get Ge-orgia. But this is the simplest and least complex form of the dementia, is entirely harmless and need not receive further notice.

Again, how many of us instead of saying simply "Georgia," when there is occasion to speak of the State otherwise than merely colloquially, must need fill our mouths with "grand old Georgia." Wherefore grand? What is her peculiar grandeur which excuses such vaporing? And as for "old," if there is any reason for bragging of age, let us remember, especially on this occasion, that Georgia—Ge-orgia, if you choose—is the youngest of the original thirteen. Again, among many enthusiasts it is impossible to speak of this fairly respectable commonwealth by any other appellation than the "Empire State of the South." Why "empire?" What is there imperial about her? Whence cometh the warrant for such arrogance? By what larger possession of those

things which make empires does she presume to rate relatively as provinces any one of her sisters, that on the north or the south, the east or the west touch the hem of her imperial garments? The Carolinas, with their wide territory, their fertile fields and their rivers, their mountains and their ocean-washed shores—and that which makes the glory of empires, their illustrious history in peace and war; Tennessee, the rich and the bountiful, smiling like a garden, stretching as far east and west as Georgia does north and south, traversed by great rivers and bounded by greater, contributing, too, her full quota of illustrious men to the common country's history; Alabama, born of Georgia, taken out of Georgia's side, her people our people, her territory and her population hardly less than ours; her soil, her mines, her rivers, her climate equal to ours, her past as honorable and her future as promising; and Florida, the wonderful peninsula, resting on her couch of coral, bathed by two seas, fanned by the breezes of Gulf and Ocean, with the opulence of the sub-tropics and the beauty and surprises of dreamland—why are these provinces while Georgia an empire is?

Why, if Georgia is an empire, be these not empires also? I can go only a part of the journey with him, who discovers some peculiar excellence in Georgia, making her better than her sisters. When she is called an empire, I echo the phrase. Yes, as I stated in an address years ago: "In extent an empire. A heaven-favored land. In natural advantages, of endless variety. In potentialities for the future, of boundless promise. One can within her borders breathe the bracing atmosphere of the mountains, and yet again, still within her boundaries, be fanned by the soft airs coming up from the not distant tropics. Great rivers traverse her wide territory and the boundless ocean receives them at her doors. Her fertile plains wave with bountiful harvests. Her hills are covered with priceless timber. The sides of her mountains scarcely conceal the rich mines they hold." All this is true. But is it not true also of her neighbors on the right hand and on the left, above and below? If we speak of her distinguished men, her statesmen, her soldiers. Yes, she has and has had them and it is her right to be proud. But any more so than any other of that band of sisters, who have shared with her the

same good and evil fortune from the beginning? So, before indulging in bragging in any key, let us take thought and consider whether we have any call to do so. Let us see whether there is not a more pressing need for reformers than for trumpeters. Let us, instead of boasting, try to come nearer a worthy ideal. Let our public men lay aside somewhat of pure demagoguery and become in some degree at least brave leaders of public opinion rather than the subservient followers of popular movements, which they know to be wrong and the mere madness of the passing hour. Let our lawyers purge their ranks of shysters, barrators and "bailiffers." Let our farmers become more thrifty. Let our merchants be more enterprising. Let our newspaper men learn to prefer truth to sensation. Let our railroad men be—well, better than they are. Let our doctors operate less often for appendicitis. Let our women be—just what they are, God bless them!—and we shall have attained much nearer a proper crowing perch than we are now roosting upon.

I know that in pursuing this line of talk I am not living up to the traditions of such occasions. To respond to a toast at such times is generally to eulogize its subject. I wish I could do so with a clear conscience. I am so sensible—though most certainly not in any pharisaical spirit—of the foibles and weaknesses embraced in the limits of the politico-social entity we call Georgia, that I find it impossible to soar in its behalf into the realm of eulogy. If one must speak about Georgia, I would have him, even in the festive atmosphere of a banquet, improve the occasion, not exactly to preach a sermon, but to protest gravely, more in sorrow than in anger, against some of the follies and worse, which pass unchallenged, and thus, rather than by misplaced eulogy, show his love for Georgia. Just think of the good this noble society could do in one or two centuries of its life, by having a sermon preached at each annual reunion from the text "Georgia"—by once a year making a determined onslaught on some derision-provoking foible or some insolent evil now tolerated in our midst.

I venture with your permission to make a beginning this evening in this missionary work. I take as my text for a short

discourse the Georgia Colonel. I do not claim that in doing this I am assailing the greatest evil that raises its head in Georgia, but I do say that it is the one which afflicts a proud and sensitive Georgian most. We can stand abuse, we can endure poverty, we can survive oppression, we can tolerate wickedness of various grades and species. But to be laughed at, to be the object of ridicule, to be the subject of perennial derision, to have a perpetual horse laugh, maintained at our expense, roaring in our ears—this is an evil, the removal of which is well worth the effort of the Sons of the Revolution, or anybody else's sons. Whence comes this particular affliction? That is the first division of my discourse. What is the remedy? That is the second division.

I am unable to find a satisfactory answer to my first question. I am sorely puzzled. It is to me a most inscrutable pschyo-social problem. I rack my brain in vain for an explanation of the mad passion of our people to call and be called—colonel. It is a form of mild dementia, sinking to the grade of imbecility and idiocy, which baffles explanation. If the fact did not surely live before our eyes, we should not be able to believe that some thousands of the white male citizens of Georgia, who know nothing of the manual of arms, who cannot even keep step, who never entertained for a moment the idea of following a military career, delight in being called—colonel.

Nay, more; the withholding of this title from any public or quasi public man, legislator, lawyer, tax collector, mayor, councilman, coroner—indeed any man who stands out ever so little from the mass of the little community in which he lives—is looked upon in many parts of the State of Georgia, as nothing less than a slight. Attend any State court, at least outside of the cities, and in what an army of colonels you find yourself. Every lawyer, from the youngest to the oldest, has left his regiment somewhere—the Lord only knows where—to attend the court. Read in our papers of any incident, however pacific and involving however little occasion for the service of the military arm, and you will find that all the actors in it are—colonels. The judge on the bench, the editor in his sanctum contribute their aid to keep this strange folly going.

The future painstaking historian will be greatly perplexed and probably misled, when he comes to deal with



this period in his "History of the People of Georgia." Like every conscientious and judicious writer of history, he will, to the fullest extent, consult contemporaneous documents and the current every day literature of the people he is describing. How very reasonable it will be in him to write such passages as this:

"At that period there was for more than a generation an epoch of unrest and anxiety, the causes of which are very difficult to discover at this day by the most diligent research. But for some reason the people of Georgia lived throughout this period under martial law. All the usual civil functions were performed by military officers. Indeed, civilians seem for many years not to have been eligible to office. From these data an estimate may be made by the careful and judicious historian of the vast military establishment of this people at that period and also of the density of the population necessary to sustain such an establishment. For a careful consideration of contemporary documents will show, that apparently even military officers were not eligible to civil office until they had attained the rank of colonel. As it is well known that in the military organization of that age a colonel was the leader of 1,000 men, and as there were not less than 5,000 colonels, we can safely conclude that the standing army of the state was 5,000,000—which, of course, implies a corresponding population."

So things will appear—and naturally, too,—to our judicious historian. But we, who live in the time of this remarkable folly, know that if the whole normal arms-bearing population were distributed equally among the colonels, each would have a following of about five men. Falstaff was ashamed to march through Coventry with his scarecrow company, but that was a martial host which assembled under his banner, compared with the muster of each of our Georgia colonels.

If it were possible to be serious in dealing with this unspeakably ridiculous folly, I would note the injustice which is done the officers of our organized militia by this indiscriminate bestowal of the title of colonel. To the officers of our organized State guard must we look for the preservation of the military spirit so essential to the safety of the state, and it is not fair to them to have to share the titles, which are legally their due, with



a lot of usurpers. Unfair, too, if indeed the ludicrous feature of the thing did not swallow up every other aspect of it, to the veteran soldier, whose title of captain, for instance, won by service and wounds and blood, is outranked on every side by whipper-snapper lawyer colonels.

We have many things to deplore in Georgia. Frequent homicides, the cowardly practice of the concealed but ever alert pistol, the increasing lynchings. All these are bad, very bad. They deter immigration and check our growth. But these tragedies are more endurable than this roaring farce. Oh, that resounding horse laugh! Oh, that ringing shout of derision that echoes throughout the land at the expense of the Georgia colonels! Cannot something be done? Can we not have a constitutional amendment on the subject? Will not the legislature at least intervene with some measure of relief? May not at least an act be passed for the benefit of the small oppressed minority who do not want to be called colonel, making it justifiable homicide to kill a man who fixes that title on an unoffending citizen in the peace of the State? If our public authorities will do nothing, will not the Sons of the Revolution, the sons of sires who freed the country from a lesser burden, come to the rescue now?







